Message

From: Deener, Kathleen [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=B9A2FF1C086249EA8F6414AFDE8A5E54-DEENER, KATHLEEN]
Sent: 9/10/2012 5:17:36 PM
To: Flowers, Lynn [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=1a4411c874d041b9a8badfc32b91bd70-Flowers, Lynn]; Cogliano, Vincent [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=51f2736376ac4d32bad2fe7cfef2886b-Cogliano, Vincent]; Clark, Becki [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=a906e07f1cd143b9a3c2ddab813b8140-Clark, Becki]; Frithsen, Jeff [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=e3743bd6f3c345baaae407c1d6f78e92-FRITHSEN, JEFF]; Bussard, David [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=cf26b876393e44f38bdd06db02dbbfe5-Bussard, David]; Vandenberg, John [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=dcae2b98a04540fb8d099f9d4dead690-Vandenberg, John]; Troyer, Michael [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=847b0020dd0e457e85f994a1ad64b26d-Troyer, Michael]; Gatchett, Annette [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=f12d699a71f84e21bddbb876dae7f96c-Gatchett, Annette]; Perovich, Gina [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=6e3c19d7f4db41bfa2477aa27ad83945-Perovich, Gina]; Debra Walsh [Walsh.DebraLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Karen Hammerstrom [Hammerstrom.KarenLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]; Jones, Samantha [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=eac77fe3b20c4667b8c534c90c15a830-Jones, Samantha]; Berner, Ted [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=f1949c9653024d3cb4aa4c2bd69c4fde-Berner, Ted]; Birchfield, Norman [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=c910f2fd28414e819b6afe6dda525e9f-Birchfield, Norman]; Elizabeth Erwin [Erwin.ElizabethLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]
CC: Kenneth Olden [Olden.KennethLNDU@usepa.onmicrosoft.com]
Subject: Greenwire profile of Ken
Attachments: DIB0001

Environmental justice pioneer plans overhaul of beleaguered division

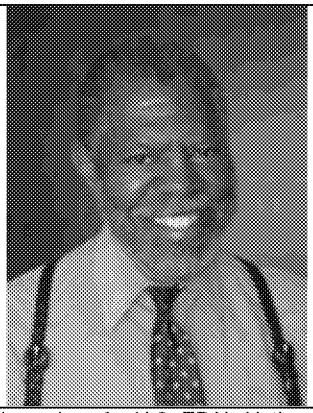
Jeremy P. Jacobs, E&E reporter

Published: Monday, September 10, 2012

When Kenneth Olden discusses environmental justice, he knows what he is talking about.

Olden led the way in establishing the area as a legitimate scientific field during more than a decade at the National Institutes of Health, funding groundbreaking research on topics such as how bus exhaust disproportionately affects minority children in low-income homes in New York City.

And though many of his colleagues don't know it, Olden's dedication to the issue is tied to his own experiences. The son of sharecroppers from an impoverished area of rural Tennessee, he is one of the few people from that community to graduate from college -- let alone ascend the echelons of the scientific community.



Kenneth Olden, a leader in environmental justice, has ambitious plans for U.S. EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment. Photo courtesy of EPA.

Now in the twilight of a career that has transcended racial boundaries, Olden has taken over U.S. EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment, or NCEA, the agency's division for determining how chemicals and environmental factors affect human health -- including what causes cancer. NCEA's assessments form the foundation of major regulations, such as drinking water and air standards.

The division has a long history of problems and is frequently criticized by public health advocates for its laggard pace, and by industry for allegedly shoddy science. But Olden brings star power to it at a time when the agency claims to be doubling down on its efforts to revamp the program.

Green groups believe he is the right person for the job. They argue that Olden, who has served on the board of the Environmental Defense Fund, understood very early the role environmental factors play in disease.

"Even in this day and age, that's a connection that a lot of people in the environmental community are pretty slow to make," said Richard Denison of EDF. "He got it 20 years ago."

And Olden, who focused during the greater part of his career on understanding cancer, isn't planning on being a figurehead. He is setting an ambitious agenda and calling for the government and scientists to fundamentally rethink how they approach disease.

"As Americans, we do not appreciate the important role that environment plays in human health," he said in an interview. "I think there is no agency in the federal government more crucial to the health of the American people than the Environmental Protection Agency. ... At NIH, we looked at one aspect of human health, but I think the agency that really translates the science into policy and practice is EPA."

At 74, Olden shows signs of decades of work in the academic setting of research. He has a gray beard and, during a recent interview, wore striped suspenders, a striped tie and a freshly pressed striped shirt with his initials embroidered on the cuffs.

Even simple sentences sound like they could be part of a lecture, and his Crystal City, Va., corner office is unadorned except for papers and boxes scattered everywhere and a wooden model of a sailboat on his desk (though he doesn't sail).

The office is a long way from where he grew up in eastern Tennessee, in Cocke County near the Appalachians. He has seven brothers and sisters, and his parents were sharecroppers who grew corn, tobacco and wheat and sold milk from the family cows.

His father had an eighth-grade education, and his mother completed the third year of high school. Through luck, he recalled, Olden had a high school principal who instilled in him the belief that he could accomplish anything he wanted -- no easy feat, considering that most universities were still segregated at the time.

"I made a decision in high school that I wanted to, first of all, be somebody, make something of my life," Olden said.

Olden shined shoes during high school, earning enough money to cover tuition at Knoxville College. While Olden was studying chemistry as a pre-med student, his professor negotiated a deal with the University of Tennessee to allow two African American students -- one male, one female -- to attend the school and conduct genetics research. Olden was selected for the program, becoming one of the first black students to attend the undergraduate school.

It was during that time, studying the genetics of a tapeworm, that Olden decided he could leave a bigger footprint through research than he could as a doctor who sees a limited number of patients.

"I wanted to make a difference, and I realized that during a whole year at the University of Tennessee, I never saw a nonwhite come through to give a seminar," he said. "I also realized that if I became a nationally recognized researcher, I would immediately make a more important contribution than I would as a practicing physician."

From Knoxville, it was on to Temple University and the University of Michigan for graduate school (he remains a Wolverines football fan), and Harvard School of Medicine for postdoctoral work. He eventually landed at the National Institutes of Health's National Cancer Institute, where he became the first African American to be a tenured independent investigator.

He spent a decade at the National Cancer Institute solely dedicated to research that he now says "propelled" his career. He became the director of NIH's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and National Toxicology Program in 1991, and served in the position for 14 years.

From lab rat to community advocate

At NIEHS, Olden began developing environmental justice as a specific scientific practice, securing grants for universities and other research institutions to work with community groups.

That shift, noted many involved in the field, was not easy.

"It's a big jump to go from a lab scientist in a white coat to someone who leads for communities that are sometimes desperately disadvantaged," said Richard Jackson, who worked with Olden at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's environmental health division. "Ken stepped up to that, and he stepped up to that with genuine integrity. He was not partisan -- he was effective socially and politically."

Jackson, who, now at the University of California, Los Angeles, is also credited as one of the first leaders on environmental justice, added that he never knew of Olden's impoverished upbringing. "I did not find Ken self-referential," he said.

During his time at NIEHS, Olden was involved in significant studies on how diesel bus exhaust leads to greater respiratory ailments among disadvantaged children in New York City because all of Manhattan's bus depots are north of 96th Street.

He also funded research on lead paint, finding that even though EPA banned the production of paint containing the potent neurotoxin in 1978, it was still found disproportionately in low-income homes -- posing a unique health risk to those children.

Additionally, Olden focused on the locations of Superfund hazardous cleanup sites, leading to research that again found they were most often closest to poor communities.

The research confirmed what many environmental health scientists suspected and provided pivotal data.

"He put money in and created a body of knowledge that moved from being a hypothetical concept to a well-documented reality," said Philip Landrigan, a leading voice on public health at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. "Ken saw that clearly, and he put the money down to support high-quality research."

Those efforts also led to changes. In part because of the bus study, New York's transportation department retrofitted the engines or shifted to hybrids to address the pollution concerns, said Peggy Shepard of West Harlem Environmental Action, or WEACT, which was involved in the project.

"I really don't think my organization would be such a leader in this field if it weren't for Dr. Olden," Shepard said.

Most recently, Olden was the founding dean of the City University of New York's new School of Public Health at Hunter College. And there, again, he has been dedicated to grooming practitioners.

"I wanted to develop a school that addressed real-world problems," he said, "not just publication for the sake of publication -- but identify the problems that they face in New York City."

Renewed focus on diesel exhaust

Olden comes to EPA at a time when the agency has professed, repeatedly, that it has renewed its focus on environmental justice.

Administrator Lisa Jackson has made it a pillar of her tenure at the agency, laying out the agency's efforts to address the needs of disadvantaged, minority and overburdened communities with her "EJ 2014" plan. And Jackson and environmental activists celebrated in Charlotte, N.C., last week when the Democratic Party officially included environmental justice in its party platform after leaving it out in 2008.

"People ask me all the time, 'What's the one thing you want to be remembered for?' and I've said I want to expand the conversation to new groups and give them a real voice at the table," Jackson told *Greenwire* (*Greenwire*, Sept. 7).

Linda Birnbaum, who has Olden's old job as director of NIEHS, said Olden is the right person to fulfill that vision.

"Dr. Olden has long experience in the area of environmental health sciences and is very passionate about issues of environmental justice and health disparities," Birnbaum said.

After just two months on the job, Olden has his sights set again on the environmental justice impacts of diesel exhaust.

He said there is general agreement that exhaust from old, dirty diesel engines cause respiratory and cardiovascular disease. But he said researchers haven't been able to prove whether it causes cancer.

"The answer is, it is a risk factor," he said. "So we're looking at it. And whatever decision we make is important for public health."

He emphasized that the new diesel engines are clean, but older engines that are used in buses, cars and construction equipment last a long time. In fact, no one knows exactly how many of those engines are on the road today, or how quickly they are being taken out of commission.

"From an environmental justice perspective, they are very concerned about it; so are we, as an agency -- and I, personally -- because it's the poor who are mostly exposed to these issues," he said.

Olden also said it's likely that not just diesel exhaust causes cancer, but a combination of environmental factors acting together.

Challenges ahead

Olden recognizes that he is arriving at NCEA at a critical juncture.

NCEA, and specifically its Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS, is charged with providing health hazard assessments for chemicals and other substances in the environment.

The program has been sharply criticized by congressional Republicans and industry for relying on insufficient scientific methodologies and by government watchdogs for not moving quickly enough. IRIS has an enormous backlog of chemicals waiting to be assessed.

The Government Accountability Office, which placed IRIS on its list of "high risk" troubled federal programs last year, said in January that the program has made some improvements but is still far from achieving its objectives (*E&ENews PM*, Jan. 9).

In particular, EPA is working diligently to implement recommendations from an April 2011 National Academy of Sciences review of the IRIS formaldehyde assessment that forcefully criticized EPA's methodologies (*Greenwire*, April 8, 2011).

It has yet to satisfy industry concerns.

"The functions of Dr. Olden's office are critical in ensuring that the IRIS program produces scientifically sound assessments that guide public health decisions," said Mike Walls of the American Chemistry Council. "Despite some incremental improvements announced by EPA over the last year, more work is needed."

Moreover, NAS is preparing a general review of the entire IRIS process at the request of congressional Republicans.

Olden, however, remains confident that he will move the program in the right direction. Asked about the NAS review, he said he is already conducting an overarching survey of the program to look for areas of improvement.

"If whatever is broke," he said, "I am pretty sure I am going to find it."

He added that he already has several ideas to improve the program. For one, he recently wrote a letter inviting government stakeholders to attend meetings where he will be briefed on how assessments are progressing.

That, he said, should help ensure that no government entities are taken by surprise when assessments are issued.

"Why don't we allow them to come to the table so they can hear [about the assessment] in the first year and don't have to wait until we publish a draft?" he said.

He also said he has a proven track record of openness with industry stakeholders from his time at NIEHS. He will continue those outreach efforts in his current position and last week met with representatives of the cleaning products industry.

"They felt they had a level playing field when I was director," he said. "They didn't always win, but I made it clear that if science is on your side, you win. If it's not, you lose."

He added: "If you get buy-in up front, it saves you a lot of problems and issues at the end."

Further, he plans to "automate" several parts of the IRIS process, relying on computer algorithms to speed up the program.

Ultimately, Olden is excited for what he could accomplish at EPA, and much as he shifted the debate on environmental justice decades ago, he hopes to change the way the country looks at disease.

"The emphasis has been on genetics -- and I like genetics, I studied genetics," he said. "But it's the environment that is just as important if not more important in the etiology of chronic disease."

He said that's why he has "always wanted to be part of the Environmental Protection Agency," but, until now at age 74, "I was never offered a job."

Kacee Deener, MPH

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